

Commentaries & Replies

On “Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the Appeal of ISIS”

Christopher J. Bolan

This commentary is in response to David S. Sorenson’s article “Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the Appeal of ISIS” published in the Autumn 2014 issue of Parameters (vol. 44, no. 3).

In “Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the Appeal of ISIS,” David Sorenson makes a compelling case that the brutal actions of this terrorist group “significantly violate fundamental Islamic tenets.” Sorenson uses his extensive knowledge of prominent fundamental Islamic theorists to demonstrate the violence inflicted by ISIS on other Muslims, minorities within the region, and Westerners falls well outside the scope of even the most conservative interpretations of Islam (Salafiyya thought). He goes on to note correctly that in many instances the ruthless actions of ISIS are expressly forbidden by “the most legitimate source of Islam, the Qur’an.” Sorenson thus lends critical analytical depth and support to the contentions of Western and Islamic leaders alike that the doctrine and actions of ISIS are contrary to the basic tenets and historical traditions of Islam.

From this solid base, Sorenson makes a less credible assertion that the United States could effectively employ these arguments to mount an information campaign ultimately to “degrade and defeat ISIS.” As he notes, the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications has been an abject failure in countering the appeal of ISIS. Despite the State Department’s best efforts, ISIS has managed to recruit as many as 6,000 new members in June 2014 alone. Moreover, he also admits the United States “faces significant obstacles in launching a counter-ISIS information campaign, as they lack credibility in the minds of most Muslims.” Sorenson is almost certainly understating these challenges given the disastrous outcome of the US military invasion of Iraq, the Abu Ghraib scandal, the indefinite detention of Muslim suspects at Guantanamo Bay, and recent revelations of the CIA’s use of “enhanced interrogation” (torture). His solution to these challenges is to mount “covert information operations” providing funding and support to Muslim voices willing to facilitate an anti-ISIS narrative. To these efforts he would also devote some attention to educating Muslims in a “better understanding of traditional Islam.”

A combined information and education campaign might indeed yield some marginal progress in the ideological battle with ISIS. We should undoubtedly continue to develop these programs at some level. However, it is a stretch to believe such an investment will significantly contribute to the defeat of ISIS and like-minded terrorist organizations. Muslim leaders across the globe quickly condemned the attacks in France, apparently inspired by al-Qaeda-like groups, such as ISIS, that

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began in the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. The Grand Mosque of Paris issued a statement saying it was “shocked” and “horrified” by death of so many innocents. Al-Azhar University, a center of Islamic learning in Cairo, characterized the attack as a “criminal act” declaring “Islam denounces any violence.” The Organization of Islamic Cooperation also condemned the attacks, offering sympathies and condolences to the people of France and the families of the victims. Iranian President Rouhani denounced the attacks as “terrorism” and Iran’s Foreign Ministry declared “all acts of terrorism against innocent people are alien to the doctrine and teachings of Islam.” There are no shortage of Muslim voices already denouncing the terrorist acts committed by ISIS and others in the name of a wickedly distorted interpretation of Islam. Will adding a few more voices to this already loud chorus really make a difference to the fraction of the global Muslim community vulnerable to the messages of these extremists?

The key to breaking this cycle as noted by *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius and Brookings scholars Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro may well be found less in waging information warfare, and more in fostering and funding partnerships between local law enforcement agencies and Muslim communities in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Leaders, parents, imams, and police in these communities can be sensitized to the warning signs of radicalization. Such programs can provide those most vulnerable to extremist messages constructive alternatives to joining violent organizations (such as participating in humanitarian relief campaigns). Alerted by these early warning signs, law enforcement officials could also act to prevent the travel of would-be extremists to Syria and other locations for training. In coordination with international and national intelligence organizations, these same local law enforcement officials could move aggressively to disrupt any plot approaching operationalization, as officials in Belgium and elsewhere have already done in the wake of the Hebdo attacks. Indeed, given the evident failure of a military-centric approach to the global war on terrorism, it is remarkable that a strategic approach grounded in intelligence and law enforcement does not receive more attention.

In summary, Sorenson contributes to the policy debate by making a convincing case that the history, doctrine, and tenets of Islam (properly understood) are not the proximate cause of radical terrorism. He is also correct in arguing a solution to Islamic extremist violence will require a “whole-of-government” approach that employs the full range of national power. However, he likely over-estimates the contribution a US-led covert information campaign alone will make to the defeat of ISIS and other Islamist terrorist organizations.

The Author Replies

David S. Sorenson

I appreciate Christopher Bolan's response to my call for an enhanced information campaign against the Islamic State, though I am a bit puzzled at his critique that my proposals "...might indeed yield some marginal progress in the ideological battle with ISIS." I agree; at the conclusion of my article I state, "If even a few potential recruits and active members can be persuaded that they will not obtain ISIS' promised heavenly reward, the counter-ISIS campaign will have succeeded." I hardly argue for dramatic results in a counter-ISIS information campaign. In combating a determined foe, almost all aspects of the campaign will produce marginal benefits, as is the case currently regarding air operations. Early results of such attacks were disappointing; after 600 initial air strikes against ISIS targets, 1000 foreign fighters continued to stream into Syria each month, virtually unchanged from pre-airstrike days.¹ It took almost six months and over 700 airstrikes to liberate the village of Kobani from ISIS fighters, killing around 1000 ISIS members, roughly one and a half militant per airstrike.² In war operations, most parts of the overall campaign contribute marginal results, to include information operations. In such a vicious fight, all elements of power must be brought to bear, including information war. Even if the contribution is "marginal," it may be no more marginal than airstrikes have been.

While Bolan argues I "overestimate" the contribution an information campaign will make in the anti-ISIS fight, he does not provide support for his conclusion. He does not, for example, use past information operations campaigns to assess the overall value of such operations, nor does he suggest reasons *why* my proposal might not achieve meaningful results. Instead, he seems to argue there are already enough Muslim narratives condemning violence in the name of Islam, stating, "Muslim leaders across the globe quickly condemned the attacks..." However, this commentary only reinforces one of my main points, which is that statements from Muslim "leaders" condemning violence in Islam's name are hardly sufficient to deter committed Jihadists. Such statements have not even dented ISIS's ability to recruit and retain members. As I argue, what has been largely missing from the information arena are the reasons *why* Islam forbids the acts ISIS routinely carried out, including the murders of innocent Muslims, the judgment of Yazadi, Alawi, Shi'a, and non-radical Sunni as apostates, and the declaration of a "caliphate" without Muslim consent. Statements declaring "shock" and "horror" are virtually meaningless unless filled in with Quranic verses refuting ISIS belief and praxis, or statements from respected Islamic theorists like Ibn Taymiyya or Said Qutb rejecting the permissibility of such ISIS practices as wonton *takfir* declarations of apostasy.

1 Greg Miller, "Airstrikes against Islamic State do not seem to have Affected Flow of Fighters to Syria," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2014.

2 Tim Arango, "In Liberated Kobani, Kurds Take Pride Despite the Devastation," *New York Times*, February 5, 2015.

Bolan argues partnerships between law enforcement and Muslim communities might be more effective than an information war campaign, but he offers no evidence to support his claim. I agree that such partnerships should be fully engaged, and models like these (built in the US on the community policing approach of the 1990s) have had success.³ But it is critical to note that relations between law enforcement and Muslim communities have been fraught with distrust on both sides, and it will take a considerable effort by both to foster cooperation. Moreover, to diagnose the “warning signs of radicalization,” requires that such signs are detectable, yet experience suggests that for each known radicalized jihadi (the Charlie Hebdo attackers, for example), a much larger number go undetected. Often family members did not know sons or daughters had joined a jihadi group until they showed up in Syria. Of course, some of this failure may involve simple denial, though most jihadi recruits, especially the “lone wolf” types, have been very successful at hiding their intentions until they either travel to the Middle East or carry out their violent actions at home. Again, to paraphrase Bolan, community policing should be tried vigorously, but it may not make more than a marginal difference.

Nonetheless, Christopher Bolan contributes positively to the dialog on fighting ISIS by reminding us we cannot expect any particular policy effort to generate decisive results by itself. This is true of bombing, of community counter-jihadi education and policing, and of all other efforts to defeat this terrorist organization. So it has been in all wars; the United States used everything from strategic bombardment to “Victory Gardens” in an overall effort to defeat the Axis, and in Vietnam, everything from “search and destroy” to the “Chieu Hoi” defector encouragement program widely derided by US military officers, yet yielded almost 30,000 Vietnamese communist defectors.⁴ So it is with the type of information campaign I proposed in my article; both what I propose and what Bolan counter-proposes may have limited effects in the overall campaign to defeat ISIS, but given the danger that ISIS poses to the Middle East and beyond, all policy elements with even a small chance to make a positive difference must be employed.

3 Jerome P. Bjelopera, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 23, 2013), 56.

4 Tal Tov, “Learning from the Past for Present Conflicts: The Chieu Hoi Program as a Case Study,” *Armed Forces & Society* 38, No. 1 (January 2012): 142-163.